

The Oregon Trail is a Loop: Video Games and the Rebuilding of Racist Structures in Education

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Abstract

In the latter half of the 20th century, American public education underwent sweeping changes that not only remade oppressive structures but reconfigured the underlying ideologies that served as the foundation for systemic oppression since this country's inception. Conceptions of race, racial subjectivity, and neoliberal capitalism as it relates to education mutated over this period, looping the progressive trail blazed by the Civil Rights movement back onto itself. The story of the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC) serves as a coherent narrative that tracks how institutional reconfiguration of race (demonstrated through the games they authored) entwined with the privatization of education (a process MECC underwent as it transitioned from public agency to private company) to produce the era we find ourselves in. That is, an era where market solutions to inequality trap education in a recursive loop and present the only means of escape as moving backwards. Coming to understand how these foundational concepts evolved is key to pushing forward once again.

Keywords: education • colorblindness • antiracism • video games • privatization

The Oregon Trail is a Loop

In the years since *Brown v. Board*, systemic racism in the U.S. education system has transformed itself numerous times, twisting away from reliance

on explicit racial divisions while maintaining outcomes that skew in favor of certain groups. This process has resulted in the redefinition of race and rewriting of race relations as both modern and historical concepts. It is important to trace the rapidly shifting foundation on which much of educational inequality is built in order to meaningfully critique the current wave of privatization sweeping through the sector. To ignore this mutation in an analysis of neoliberal incursions is to reduce systemic discrimination and the asymmetric flow of power to problems of resource allocation, representation, and privilege, an issue that occurs all too often in discussions surrounding the social construction of race generally and whiteness specifically.

The transitions from direct segregation to colorblind racism that spread in the aftermath of *Brown v. Board* to the current era of 'antiracist racism' are periods that offer particularly illustrative windows into the cyclical relationship between systems of privatization and racial discrimination. These periods also serve as pivotal moments in the rewriting of racial subjectivity and further entrenching of neoliberal capitalist ideology, the conceptual keys to enduring inequality. Analyzing how their manifestations in education entwined during these transitory periods is vital to developing an understanding of how power operates in education. This analysis must occur on both curricular and administrative levels as the two work together to articulate the reconfigured ideas that underlie systemic discrimination. Shifts in curriculum during these transitory periods reveal how justifications of racial subjectivity and the privileging of neoliberal capitalist ideology evolved while shifts in administration demonstrate the material consequences of those evolutions.

The institution best positioned to examine these periods is the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC). Created by the state of Minnesota to network public school computers in the early 1970s, MECC grew into one of the largest and most successful educational software producers in the world by the 1990s. In the process, MECC embodied some of the major transitions American education underwent between the late 20th and dawn of the 21st century. As a result, it is the perfect place from which to launch an inquiry into how the American education system took on its modern form. A close reading of MECC materials can illuminate shifts in curriculum while an examination of changes in MECC's corporate structure, direction, and mission can do the same for administration.

The University of Minnesota, State University System, Community College System, and Minnesota Department of Education created MECC in 1973 via the state joint powers act. This law allowed various government agencies to create, own, and operate an organization that holds all the powers held jointly by the involved agencies (LaFrenz, 1995). In this case, these four departments created MECC in response to an order from the governor that each sector must create a statewide plan to control computing costs. MECC was put in charge of all educational computing with its main task to link all schools in Minnesota to a centralized network. This required MECC to commission or construct the “first ever multi-purpose time-sharing system of such significant size,” according to a 1995 interview with Dale LaFrenz, a central figure in MECC’s formation and operation. MECC achieved unparalleled success; by the 1974-75 school year, Minnesota tripled statewide computer access, reaching 84% of public-school students (Rankin, 2019).

The Oregon Trail and the Introduction of Colorblindness

MECC began to dabble in courseware even during its infancy, releasing *The Oregon Trail* – one of the most innovative and popular educational games of all time – in 1975. The game’s interdisciplinary nature, blending of content and gameplay, and student-centered approach were all revolutionary upon release, and thanks to MECC’s relationship with Minnesota school districts, the game was immediately available across the state.

As a landmark title in both the MECC catalog and the general history of educational games, *The Oregon Trail* deserves some special attention. The game’s development predates MECC, having been created initially in 1971 by Don Rawitsch, Bill Heinemann, and Paul Dillenberger – three Carleton College seniors completing their student teaching requirement. After his supervising teacher gave him three weeks to plan a unit on westward expansion, Rawitsch spent a week working on a board game as a novel teaching tool. Upon seeing their roommate’s work, Heinemann and Dillenberger – both programmers – began to envision an interactive simulation. Working late nights and over weekends, Rawitsch researched the history of the trail, Heinemann planned and wrote the main code, and Dillenberger created the subroutines (Wong, 2017).

These origins help explain many of the ideological and political issues *The Oregon Trail* franchise suffers from. Developed in essentially two weeks by three overworked student teachers, the original game lacked critical attention to its underlying ideology and messaging as the focus was on creating an engaging, one-off lesson. As a result, the game promotes the individual – rather than communal – orientation that serves as the bedrock of western capitalism. That *The Oregon Trail* adopts this ideology makes sense, given the intense anti-communist push that pulsed through the public education system beginning in the 1940s (Foster, 2000). This unspoken foundational element manifests not only in gameplay where players are incentivized to center every interaction on their own external goals but also in a game that speaks almost exclusively to the player, “underscoring the simulation’s individualistic ideology that all the world exists for you, the controller of the mouse” (Bigelow, 1997). Future iterations of *The Oregon Trail* built from this foundation would further the game’s privileging of western capitalist and colonialist thought. In this way, default assumptions about base levels of social organization propagate themselves, becoming the bases of educational materials that further entrench these unspoken and unexamined beliefs.

Another consequence of the game’s compressed timeline made itself known in the aftermath of Rawitsch’s initial lesson. Feedback from school faculty criticized the game’s negative portrayal of Native Americans, and some teachers argued it placed indigenous student players in a constant battle with themselves (Wong). This racist portrayal was the direct result of production limitations as, according to Rawitsch in the MinnMaxShow YouTube documentary *Trailheads*, “the data put into the computer that determined what would happen to you on the trail was based on our composite knowledge... as to what historical reality was like, tainted a bit by memories of old John Wayne movies” (2020). Despite the lack of research, historical integrity, and the negative depictions of Native nations, Rawitsch described the game as a hit among the students, boosting engagement and inspiring early arrivals and late departures among the class.

Relegating race representation to an ancillary role informed more by westerns and “books we read as kids” (MinnMaxShow) was a production decision that captured the extent to which *The Oregon Trail* mirrored Minnesota’s education system at the time of its creation. At this point, Minnesota was recognized for its forward-thinking public education system (LaFrenz) – success analogous with *The Oregon Trail*’s innovative

pedagogical approach. However, the turn of the decade also exposed the racial tensions that pervaded the Minnesota education system – tension stemming from institutional ignorance of minority parents and students, best summed up by Heilman in 1994. Over a decade after *Brown v. Board* called for the desegregation of schools, the Minneapolis school board had taken few steps to comply with the Supreme Court’s decision. Citizens went so far as to form the Committee for Integrated Education (CIE) in 1966 to pressure public officials to make a genuine effort to integrate. The following year, the district decided to build an unusually large school – Bethune Elementary – in a predominantly black area with the clear intention of preventing black students from enrolling in surrounding schools. After years of public battles with the school board and anti-integration activists, CIE’s greatest victory came in 1970, when the board revised their Human Relations Guidelines. CIE member Barbara Schwartz explained to an advisory committee to the United States Civil Rights Commission, “this Guideline writing then became a substitute for action... I guess we felt it just had to be forced” (Heilman, 1994). To force genuine action, CIE hired attorney Charles Quaintance in 1971, the same year Rawitsch, Heinemann, and Dillenberger created *The Oregon Trail*. Before the year’s end, Quaintance suggested CIE file suit, which led to the *Booker v. Special School District No. 1* case in early 1972. Born under this cloud of institutional indifference, *The Oregon Trail*, in both its initial and revised forms, demonstrates clear parallels between structural and curricular discrimination in the post-*Brown v. Board* education system.

After their graduation, Rawitsch kept a printed version of the game’s code, but did not revisit it until 1974. After he was drafted for the Vietnam War, Rawitsch gained a conscientious objector exemption on the condition he complete two years of alternative service. This happened to coincide with MECC’s search for young teachers to help build out its software library. The MECC post satisfied Rawitsch’s service requirement, and the consortium quickly greenlit his revival of *The Oregon Trail* (Rawitsch).

Rawitsch knew he needed to bring a greater degree of historical accuracy to the game. His primary focus involved changing the random events’ frequencies to align with history – calculations he made by consulting diaries and journals of pioneers who traversed the trail (MinnMaxShow). During this research, he was “surprised by how often people wrote about the help they received from Native Americans who helped them understand where the trail was, where it went, what kind of food along the way was edible and which would make you ill” (Rawitsch). This information was used to render a more

“sensitive” portrayal of Native Americans that “manifested... as a new event that could occur when players were struggling. Native Americans would approach the party and offer help by sharing food or supplies with the settlers” (Rawitsch).

As a result, most interactions between players and indigenous nonplayable characters (NPCs) are framed as either mutually beneficial exchanges of goods and services or as gestures that indicate Native nations were happy to welcome white settlers as they pushed west. In contrast to the historical reality, *The Oregon Trail* does not work to justify violent colonialism by directly propagating a narrative of cultural supremacy. Rawitsch claims he and the MECC team were “very concerned about the way Native Americans were portrayed” during the revision process. Attitudes towards racial sensitivity both in MECC and the United States in the mid-70s made previous justifications of racism and colonialism unpalatable. The revised history presented in *The Oregon Trail* instead erases or minimizes the costs of westward expansion and – under the guise of a positive portrayal of indigenous peoples – presents colonial invasion largely as a collaborative cultural project. In solving the negative portrayal issue by rendering Native Americans as helpful collaborators, *The Oregon Trail* implicitly sets white colonists as the default protagonists of history with those who help them expand westward as ‘positive’ and those who challenge their progress as ‘negative.’

Despite attempts to correct their negative portrayal, MECC’s revisions do not eliminate the criticism school faculty gave *The Oregon Trail* in 1971. The game still asks students with Native American ancestry to play against themselves; they are not given the option to play the game as anything other than a white male colonizer. Players of other races or genders must otherize NPCs that share their identities because of both the rigid positionality of the player-character and the way *The Oregon Trail* constructs all NPCs as tools to be used for the players progress – clear in both dialogue interaction and information presentation (for example, players can elect to read about Native nations in a guidebook that also contains information on various animals and plants) (Slater, 2017).

Though the interactions added during MECC revisions largely depicted Native Americans as welcoming of white colonists, there are dialogue options that mention and minimize the impacts of colonialism. Interaction with one Arapaho man includes the line “my people talk of moving,” implying choice.

This same conversation frames the environmental consequences that devastate Arapaho resources as “overgrazing” (Slater). By framing this as a cultural clash negotiated by both parties, the game absolves the player – or rather, the white player-character – of responsibility for the already minimized impacts of colonization.

The revised depiction of the relationship between Native Americans and white settlers – combined with the outright ahistorical inclusion of Black Americans as welcome trail traversers when the Oregon Territory’s provisional government outlawed their immigration in 1844 (Taylor, 1982) – works to pave over the codified racial hierarchy that stretched from America’s founding through the Civil Rights Era by erasing power imbalances between white and non-white people. This is congruent with the developments in Minnesota’s education system between 1971 and 1975. Specifically, in the aftermath of the *Booker* case, the courts took over integration efforts from the school board (Heilman, 1994), and thanks to their efforts, the Twin Cities area and Minnesota as a whole became one of the least segregated regions in the country (Orfield, 2018). The removal of state sanctioned segregation was one of the final blows against the explicit state racism that underpinned conceptions of whiteness and racial subjectivity. The updated version of *The Oregon Trail*, rather than reflecting and critiquing the white supremacy narrative that justified colonialism in the pioneer era, instead serves as a foundational text for a new “post-racial” conception of whiteness that could no longer rely on the explicit, codified form of citizenship and legal status afforded by a pre-integration America that built its social and legal systems on ideas of racial subjectivity. Racism is reconceptualized as an understated outcome of mutual negotiation over discrete economic transactions necessary to the supreme values of economic and cultural advancement rather than as a codified hierarchical system that justified violent resource theft, enslavement, and death. By reducing the broad narrative of white supremacy to an individual narrative of economic prosperity, *The Oregon Trail* helps move whiteness and all race from an explicit, legal form of subjectivity making racial superiority appear inherent to one that erases power imbalances to render superiority as an individual achievement won on a level playing field.

Ideologies at the game’s core, including the privileging of economic gain and cultural advancement, were already baked into the 1971 version of *The Oregon Trail*, and were not revisited in subsequent revisions. Rawitsch makes clear the research that informed the new racial portrayals occurred by

accident as he collected data meant to correct benign historical inaccuracies involving the frequency of random events such as bad weather and broken wagons. Due to this misplaced focus, the MECC team neglected to consider the larger root issues of race and ideology – issues that may have warranted greater scrutiny had they designed the game from scratch, though this is just speculation. That the underlying assumptions Rawitsch, Heinemann, and Dillenberger initially adopted go uncontested is clear before one plays the game. In the teacher’s manual that accompanies a later version of *The Oregon Trail*, MECC lists a set of social studies learning objectives that include “persuade, compromise, bargain; practice patience and perseverance in working for one’s goal,” (1985) baking the bootstrap metaphor at the heart of the American dream into the game’s foundation.

The game’s encouragement of rapid movement and westward progression at the expense of rest and quiet reflection serves to buttress cultural myths that privilege colonial conquest, individual achievement, and cultural progress. While resting provides certain in-game benefits – recovering from illness and replenishing stamina and health – the quick depletion of resources combined with the lack of progress towards the main objective urges players to resume their journey as soon as possible (Slater). Choosing to reconsider the necessity of forward momentum, reflect on the human costs of advancing, or in any way rejecting the colonial narrative implicit in the game’s objectives results in a final-score penalty. By encouraging players to orient themselves in this way, *The Oregon Trail* works to train the ideal American worker, one who subconsciously places the highest values on economic achievement and progress at all costs.

Perhaps most telling, *The Oregon Trail* never gives the player room to interrogate the morality of their actions. Environmental destruction is superficially recognized as harmful only insofar as it may incur the wrath of Native nations, not as a negative outcome in and of itself. Similarly, family deaths are recognized as harmful only in that losing members hurts the player’s score, reducing people to numbers (it does not help that deceased characters are often included in lists of lost tools and animals). The game never uses deaths to question if the trek is worth taking. In this way, economic prosperity and individual achievement are presented as the unquestioned supreme cultural values, placed over morality, the well-being of others and the environment, and even the lives of family members.

America's whitewashing of its violent colonial history was commonplace in education long before *The Oregon Trail* – the white male colonizer has held the position of default protagonist of U.S. history since the subject's inception. However, the medium – video games – introduced a new element. Students were no longer reading ahistorical or historically limited accounts of the past. As a game, *The Oregon Trail* forces students to take on the positionality of a white male settler participating in the violent colonial project of westward expansion. In doing so, the game builds upon long-standing narratives of whiteness, white normalization, and white supremacy while otherizing non-white races. In forcing all students who play *The Oregon Trail* to adopt white racial subjectivity and an individualistic neoliberal orientation, the game encourages students to take these social constructs as given truths to a further extent than previously possible. This powerful force of normalization trains students as social and economic cogs by turning their critical attention to the more immediate in-game problems of survival and advancement while underpinning all activity with the unspoken ideologies through which power perpetuates, thus working to place these cultural myths further below the bounds of awareness.

The Road to Privatization

The Oregon Trail quickly became MECC's most popular game (MinnMaxShow). However, its initial cultural impact was limited to Minnesota as it was housed on the timesharing network MECC was created to manage. As LaFrenz describes in his 1995 interview, thanks to a fortunate string of coincidences, MECC's reach swept across the country shortly after *The Oregon Trail's* release. Following the completion of the time-sharing network, MECC instructional coordinator Kent Kehrberg attended a conference in California where he witnessed a demonstration of the Apple II, a color-display microcomputer that could be controlled at a local level. Even though they had just completed their expensive time-sharing system, MECC negotiated a special price with Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak (a pair of 21-year-olds who were wholly unaware of the use of computers in schools) and purchased five Apple IIs. Over the next school year – 1978-9 – MECC became the largest thirdparty seller of Apple computers as Minnesota schools bought over 500. Thanks to the implicit endorsement from the national leader in educational technology, Apple gained a foothold in the education market and

began selling the Apple II across the country. The proliferation of the Apple II created a demand for software that, thanks to their work converting their game library to work on Apple machines, MECC was best positioned to fill. The consortium then created a national distribution network and began to export *The Oregon Trail* and other software across the country. In this way, a state-run organization meant to network school computers built the educational software industry and served as its greatest innovator for over a decade.

Because MECC found a radically new purpose even before microcomputing made its time-sharing system obsolete, in 1983, the state took control from the four agencies that created MECC and transitioned it from a consortium to a public corporation. The law makes clear MECC's main mission – to provide public value – remained intact (Minnesota Statutes 1984). It provided products to Minnesota schools at cost and established a differential pricing policy as it exported software across the country and globe.

MECC's transition from state agency to for-profit corporation owned by the state came along with a wave of neoliberal language that flooded education discourse in the 1980s. A year before MECC's transition, the Citizens League of Minnesota published a report calling for "competition and entrepreneurship," in the school system and supporting voucher systems that had been championed by neoliberal economists for decades (Friedman, 1955). The report points to government bureaucracy as a barrier to the invention and adoption of novel educational software and imagines home learning technology will soon allow companies to bypass slow-changing public administration. It never mentions that over the last decade, Minnesota's own state government was the driving force behind the bulk of the industry's innovation (Trusz, 1982). Like how MECC erased certain experiences from *The Oregon Trail*, the organization's success as a public agency was erased from education discourse as the drive to privatize ramped up.

On a national level, corporate interest in education grew in the 80s as economic downturn, globalization, and new technology left businesses grasping for a semblance of economic control. Shifting focus to public education reform allowed corporations to at once guide the training of their domestic workforce and shift the blame for national economic problems onto schools (Mickelson, 1999). In 1983, a federal report titled "A Nation at Risk," began to sow the seeds of discontent with public education on a national

level. By employing hyperbolic language exaggerating the state of education while tying national security to education outcomes, the report resulted in calls across the political spectrum for, “higher standards, better test results, and greater performance accountability from public schools” (Strauss, 2018). This was congruent with the Reagan administration’s overarching goals of slashing the education budget and reducing the federal government’s role in education (Fiske, 1982). “A Nation at Risk” helped begin a transformation that would mold the education system for decades, and while neoliberalization did not begin in earnest until the 90’s, the report’s publication set the foundation for that process in the same year MECC took steps towards privatization.

Though never used as an example of public education’s strength, MECC found as much success as a state-owned corporation as it had as a government agency. LaFrenz, ever the source of information concerning MECC’s journey as an organization, surmises its decade in his 1995 interview. As he puts it, competition in the educational software market ramped up in the 80s as the industry grew, but MECC maintained a hold over the school market. This was largely because MECC – unlike private corporations – understood the need to both design for and market towards teachers as well as administrators. Their melding of theory and practicality along with their relationship with districts across the country allowed them to dominate the school market throughout the 80s.

At the end of the decade, George H.W. Bush held a national education summit where business leaders helped set the national education agenda, signaling that the new administration had the same policy of embracing market principles to solve for inefficient government bureaucracies as the old. Business goals in school reform ranged from the revisal of skill and knowledge standards to a more direct school-to-career pipeline, to the implementation of standardized tests, to the reformation of school funding (Larson, 2002). Private sector incursions beginning in the late 80s spanned the entirety of the 90s, from Bill Clinton’s federal support for charter schools to Jeb Bush’s voucher program in Florida.

Despite their successful decade, MECC was not immune to the privatization wave as the 80s also saw the wide adoption of microcomputers for home use. Because the corporation had only designed for the Apple II, the company found it impossible to break into the home market without significant investment from the state government. As even schools began to replace the

Apple II with Macintoshes and PCs, MECC had to seek additional funding which could only be secured through privatization. Despite its popularity among Minnesota schools, the state sold MECC in the early 1990s.

Freedom and Antiracist Racism

As a result of privatization and the subsequent swap in core values from public good to profit, MECC chased the success of *The Oregon Trail* by developing more survival-based history games. During this process, MECC designer Rich Bergeron met Kamau Kambui (Whitaker, 2020), a black nationalist based near MECC headquarters who created an experimental learning environment called “Underground Railroad Reenactment” in the late 80s (Sacco, 2020). Kambui would go on to advise Bergeron and four other white MECC designers as they created *Freedom*, a slavery-escape simulation. Marketing materials make MECC’s intentions clear: “to provide inclusive instructional materials,” and “portray the experiences and perspectives of people from various cultures” (Whitaker), a stark departure from the colorblind approach to race and cultural diversity in the days of *The Oregon Trail*. At this point, MECC supplied 1/3 of American school districts with educational software (Sacco, 2020) and had to keep up with growing market demand for multicultural educational materials.

This difference between *Freedom* and *The Oregon Trail* comes as a result of a deeper similarity – both games are reflective of the restructuring institutional racism underwent at the time of their development. In 1988 – ten years after the court returned control to the schoolboard following the *Booker* case – Minnesota remained one of the least segregated states in the country (Orfield) and maintained some of the nation’s highest graduation rates and lowest dropout rates (Haney et al., 2004). However, 1988 also saw the publication of a Citizen’s League report that staunchly supported charter school adoption. The executive summary makes clear the league’s argument is on the basis of moving “closer to real integration,” and finding a new approach to multicultural education – a perversion of the term that was certainly ahead of its time. In their 2017 meta-study, Kohli et al. identify how multiculturalism has recently been used to “evade discussions of power or inequity in education in policy and practice.” Importantly, a revision of the report removed a proposal to desegregate by income level as well as race because it would be too much “cumbersome work” (Smetanka, 1988). In part

because of that Citizens League report – recognized as starting the nationwide charter movement and shaping federal definitions of charter schools (Budde, 1996) – the first charter school in the country opened in St. Paul in 1992. Today, “of the 50 most racially concentrated Twin Cities schools, 45 are charters” (Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, 2017). Charter schools received federal support following legislation in 1994 and have catalyzed (re)segregation across the nation – nominally by economic status but practically by race (Whitehurst, 2016). Once again, Citizens League’s suggested solution created the problem they were trying to solve.

Freedom was released the same year the nation’s first charter school opened and was sold to the public in a similar fashion. In contrast to *The Oregon Trail*, developers centered Black histories and paid specific attention to race in their research, as evidenced by Kambui’s heavy involvement. However, the game’s attention to historical detail – especially concerning the skills players could possess, the dialect used by Black characters, and the punishments suffered upon failure – all caused a small but vocal outcry. Rather than marginalization through colorblindness and neglect, *Freedom* aligns with the new form of racism that began to creep into education once privatization efforts ramped up, using antiracist and multicultural language as part of a sales pitch for products and services that perpetuate racism and discrimination.

Specific to *Freedom*, the game’s faith to the historical skill limitations imposed on enslaved persons manifests in the perpetuation of stereotypes. At the beginning of the game, players are randomly assigned the ability – or lack of ability – to read, write, and swim. However, the images and dialogue used in this pre-game period drew the most ire. Players can receive advice from various characters – as they could in the pre-game period in *The Oregon Trail*. In *Freedom* though, these characters have an appearance eerily similar to minstrel cartoon depictions of Black Americans. Speaking with the character Grandfather Cato triggers a dialogue emblematic of how Black characters speak throughout the game. “I sees a runnin’ look in yo’ eyes, chile. How c’n I help? Speak sof’ly, though, so’s nobody overhears yuh.” Though this dialect is similar to that found in published slave narratives from the 19th and 20th centuries, according to Clemson Professor Susanna Ashton, “the dialect did not necessarily reflect how (enslaved persons) actually spoke” (Whitaker). MECC deployed a pre-emptive defense of this production decision in the manual for *Freedom*, writing “this (dialect) was highly recommended by our

consultant, an African American who leads people on overnight Underground Railroad simulations” (1992).

This attempt to spin what amounts to a racist caricature as a point of progressivism via hollow identity politics encapsulates the antiracist racism that grew during this era. The colorblindness that characterized the relationship between whiteness and minority races was replaced by a desire to receive a metaphorical ‘not-racist’ stamp of approval. This justification of dialect, along with the marketing materials surrounding *Freedom*, fed into the new feature of whiteness by directly selling *Freedom* as an antiracist tool. Just as Citizen’s League promised charter schools would bring ‘real integration,’ MECC promised *Freedom* would bring ‘inclusive instructional material,’ and if anyone found the dialect offensive, they had a ready-made response. Their African American consultant told them it was okay.

Despite Kambui’s involvement and genuine attempts at creating a game that taught students about the realities of slavery, *Freedom* required instructor intervention if play were to educate. Otherwise, the game played out like a minstrel show (Wong). Unfortunately, many schools did not incorporate MECC games into curriculum, rather, students could play the games in computer labs on their own time (Schuytema, 1993), which exposed Black children to ridicule as students took a self-guided journey through the “unintelligible” dialect and “trivializing” game experience (West, 1993). Instructor intervention did not guarantee better outcomes. *Freedom*’s manual suggests teachers, “have students re-enact the institution of slavery,” a lesson plan that does nothing to distance the game from accusations it “Nintendoized” such a traumatic historical event.

Though sold as a game meant to “portray the experiences and perspectives of people from various cultures,” *Freedom* served to “alienate and misrepresent” African American students (Schuytema). Though production intentions were most likely genuine, the resulting game still served as an otherizing force in the eyes of both children and adults. Following the public relations disaster that saw MECC issue a rare recall of software, the company hired third-party market research company MarkeThink! to check the damage *Freedom* caused ahead of the launch of another game, *Africa Trail*. Though it concludes *Freedom* did not affect the company’s reputation, the report brief includes summary of frank discussions held with a focus group of Black female teachers on *Freedom*. A key takeaway highlighted in the report was “*Freedom* reinforced the separation of cultures and represented the language of

poverty. It was not a celebration of rich colorful vernacular” (1994). While the group acknowledged amongst themselves that Black people often talk to each other differently than they talk with white people, they agreed “this private conversational tone (is) not something which is open to exposure or to mimicking by the white community, even in the interest of accurately depicting Black culture.”

Despite its swift recall – triggered mostly by the vocal outrage of one elementary school community (West) – *Freedom* encapsulated the transition from “evaded racism” to “antiracist racism,” that continues to sweep through education today. While not exhaustive, Kohli’s previously mentioned survey of scholarship found that education researchers focused on “antiracist racism... where racial inequitable policies and practices are actually masked as the solution to racism,” over 600% more than on “evaded racism.” Citizen’s League littered their charter school report with antiracist language, and similar ideas continue to justify the overuse of standardized tests, which continue to produce racially biased results and thus help convert race as conceptualized as skin color to race conceptualized as statistical profile (Au, 2016).

Freedom is particularly illustrative of antiracist racism in action. MECC used a feature of the product – dialect – as part of an antiracist sales-pitch and justified its inclusion through historical accuracy and their African American consultant. This calls back to the 1971 version of *The Oregon Trail*, the negative portrayal just comes smuggled in an antiracist package. However, as the focus group conversation demonstrates, not all aspects of all cultures are necessary or beneficial to include in educational materials meant for broad consumption. Cloaked in antiracism and the veneer of objectivity, this new breed of content is more effective at constructing racialized subjects tied to behaviors. In the context of new racist structures – charter schools and testing – antiracist teaching tools help reconceptualize race as an economic, statistical, and behavioral profile that cleanly positions certain (white) people as healthy, educated, and normal and other (non-white) people as unhealthy, uneducated, and deviant using “objective” numbers and historical observation. From this point, it is easy to paint this second group as a problem in need of more antiracist policies and purchasing decisions that, once in place, only function to justify the next round of reforms and market solutions.

Conclusion: Is This What Progress Looks Like?

Though the concept of antiracist racism gives the illusion of progress – advancing from ignoring to acknowledging race sounds like a move in the right direction – antiracist racism and its continued status as the preferred mode of justification for racist structures in education does more to insulate whiteness from threats to its institutional dominance than colorblind racism ever did. Antiracist racism acts as a sort of controlled opposition, allowing institutions to direct efforts aimed at combatting racial and economic injustices in ways that preserve those underlying systems. Power structures are attacked at points of resource allocation (charter schools) and inclusivity (*Freedom*) while the systems that direct power in unbalanced ways (racial subjectivity, neoliberalism) are strengthened. Structures of antiracist racism insist upon market solutions to racial inequalities, implying these issues can be overcome by purchasing the correct tools and tweaking the right policies. This sales pitch allows various products to satisfy the new antiracist or not-racist element of white liberal identity and bolsters neoliberal incursions into education, all while leading to the adoption of products that deepen the issues they claim to solve.

In the end, antiracist racism adds yet another layer of insulation that must be carved through to strike at the heart of the oppressive systems that operate education. If racial subjectivity and neoliberal capitalism serve as the foundational ideas upon which all else is built, then their first line of defense is the white supremacist myth used to justify colonialism and slavery from the birth of the United States. Placed on top of this layer is the belief that, once explicit racial subjectivity was scrubbed from the legal system, society advanced to a point of post-racism where, on a now level playing field, the pursuit of economic glory no longer produces racist outcomes, but outcomes that happened to favor one race. What antiracist racism does is make this “post-racism” layer of defense the new ideal outcome in the struggle for racial equality. Schools seek out educational products like *Freedom* so each race can be represented in curriculum. Policy goals of “real integration” justify governmental endorsement of charter schools and the adoption of market principles in education. Both nominally work towards equal representation and distribution of resources – both admirable and necessary goals – but without acknowledging the underlying systems that continue to encourage racial segmentation and domination. In creating this shortsighted approach,

antiracist justifications of racist practices allow institutions to fight symptoms by using the underlying disease.

Following privatization, MECC failed to reach the 2000s intact. Today, *The Oregon Trail* is the only MECC product still in circulation. Racist structures have moved beyond colorblindness, remade into “antiracist,” market-based solutions to racism, embodied by resegregation via private charter schools and the ‘meritocracy,’ of privately administered, racially biased standardized tests. These new structures and the underlying policy goals used to justify them implicitly cosign the exact same systematic oppression that has plagued education since the birth of this country. While the era of public involvement in education was flawed, under it we made strides in both pedagogical innovation and racial equality. The era of private sector encroachment has brought profit motives that encourage innovation in only finding new ways to create and “solve,” the same problems over and over again.

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